

EARTH NIGHT CONCERTS

This orchestra was founded after Dominic Johnson (another cigar night occasional attendee) approached me with a concert idea. Dominic is a professional violist in Chicago, playing with several orchestras. He wanted to produce a concert in which the first part would be an orchestra playing Beethoven. He would assemble the orchestra from among the young musicians of Chicago—all professional in their skills. The second half of the concert would be a DJ re-mixing the first half.



I told him this sounded like recycling Beethoven, so we should take it to the 48th Ward where the alderman is very Green and the community would support us. The Chamber of Commerce took to it right away, with executive director Sheli Lulkin helping us to obtain a venue (St. Andrew's Greek Orthodox Church), sponsorship and support in the condo's.

Dominic put together a 34 piece orchestra, under the direction of Francesco Milioto. They chose the name New Millennium Orchestra (www.nmorchestra.org), and we called it the Earth Night Concert ([See video clip](#)). We had a friend, jRick (www.jrick.com) who re-mixed Beethoven's Fourth Symphony with modern percussive and electronic effects, and new melodic structures, but it was clearly Beethoven's voice centuries later.

We augmented the festivities with large scale live projections by Brian Dressel (OVT Visuals) and fire dancing by SPUNN (www.spunn.org). ([See another video clip](#)) Alderman Mary Ann Smith (48th) gave out environmental awards, and everyone loved the occasion.

You can see some video on www.nmorchestra.org, and I can get you jRick's re-mixes.

The next year, they asked us to do it again, and we went for some changes. I was able to get about 10 projectors out of different City departments and put them in the hands of Mason Dixon, Nathan Peck and Aaron Edwards, three top-knotch artists and VJ's in town. They put together a video installation on Planet Earth. We had ambient guitar music for that, and then brought up the Pilgrim Baptist Choir from their church on the south side. You may remember that church burned down in January of that year. I started helping them with a pro bono web site. Their senior choir of 25 voices came north, and we used their white robes as a projection surface. We also had fire dancing and called it "Fire with the Choir".

Last year, we called Green Festival at McCormick Place to let them know of our concert plans, and to invite them to attend. They turned the tables and invited the orchestra to become their closing ceremony. We had the orchestra, Michael Kang from The String Cheese Incident, and the Burning Man community in a tribute to the elements, complete with interpretations of fire, water, air and earth. We gave awards to the folks in Edgewater who had made the first two years possible.

That night, Dominic Johnson took over the Hot House and collaborated with DJ Spooky and the Abominable Twitch in an interpretation of the Guya Hypothesis (white and black daisies seeking balance). Visuals by Mason Dixon.

This year, we are producing both the open and the close of Green Fest at Navy Pier, in addition to the proposed River Concert.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Understand the motives and values of all concerned and make sure you serve them well in an event like this. Musicians may not want to be environmental scholars, and should be allowed to pursue their art without additional burdens.**
- **Look for ways to make music a tool of environmentalism, not just a commodity to draw a crowd of donors. We worked to arrange some Hungarian folk songs to draw an immigrant population out for a gardening day—overcoming language barriers and extending a hand of welcome.**
- **Make sure everyone feel appreciated—even people who looked askance at the idea to begin with.**
- **Give out awards, when possible. People love to have awards on their walls, and you can preempt troubles if potential critics are being given awards.**
- **Get the awards signed before you frame them, or you'll have to explain why they were signed with grease pencil on glass.**
- **Respect union prerogatives.**
- **Re-define relationships. Musicians are used to being hit up for "free" performances. Find a way to make your event something different from that, if you want them to see new opportunities.**
- **Show respect for elders, even if they have no role in your project.**

- **Build real and personal friendships with the people who help you, and they'll help you again.**
- **Take the time to explain cool stuff to casual passers by.**
- **Do not use punk rock to test your sound system in an orthodox church.**